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SUBJECT: FORCED EVICTION ATTEMPT IN KAMPOT PROVINCE LEADS TO
INJURIES

This Message is Sensitive but Unclassified.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On November 17, Kampot provincial forestry officials, police officers, and soldiers from the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) Brigade 31 (B31) attempted to evict approximately 300 families without lawful notice from Anlong Khmeng Leng village in Kampot Province. Forestry officials accuse the villagers of illegally occupying land in Bokor National Park. During the incident, seven villagers sustained injuries, three of them serious, and provincial forestry officials burned down the villagers' houses. About 200 families currently remain in the area, and the provincial government said that it does not plan to attempt another eviction until it has determined which villagers need resettlement assistance. This case highlights a larger set of land issues in Cambodia, which Post plans to incorporate in a future report. END SUMMARY.

EVICTION ATTEMPT

¶2. (SBU) On November 17, Kampot provincial forestry officials, police officers, and soldiers from RCAF's B31 attempted to evict approximately 300 families from Anlong Khmeng Leng village in Taken Commune, Chhuk District, Kampot Province. [NOTE: Media and NGO reports have called the village "Anlong Krom", but the residents refer to the village as "Anlong Khmeng Leng". END NOTE.] Forestry officials said that the villagers were illegally occupying land within the borders of Bokor National Park. According to the Kampot governor's office, the operation included:

- One Kampot provincial government official;
- Twelve officials from the Ministry of Environment;
- Nine provincial forestry officers;
- Four provincial police officers;
- Five military police officers; and
- 24 soldiers from Brigade 31.

¶3. (SBU) During the incident, three villagers sustained serious injuries. A soldier reportedly beat one man with a stick and gun butt, and the other two victims reported being hit repeatedly on their backs and heads. Human Rights NGOs on the scene reportedly attempted to evacuate the injured but alleged that soldiers prevented them from leaving until later in the evening. The NGOs later took the injured to a hospital in Kampong Speu, where two still remain. Four additional villagers sustained minor injuries and remained on the scene. The injured villagers include:

- Un Chandara, male, 22: Head injuries, bruising;
- Hun Rin, male, 52: Heavy bruising;
- Prak Yong, male, 52: Head injuries, smashed teeth;
- Chheun Chhun, male, 29: Minor injuries;
- Chhim Phean, female, 40: Minor injuries;
- Chhim Thoeun, female, 24: Minor injuries; and
- Prak Thoeun, male, 40: Minor injuries.

¶4. (SBU) The eviction team also burned down the houses in the village during the incident. Brigade 31 Deputy Commander COL Kong

Lum told Poloff that his unit was just on the scene to provide security, and that forestry officials set fire to the houses. A local forestry contact also said that forestry officials were responsible for dismantling and burning the houses. Village representatives were not sure which groups had set fire to the houses, saying that the eviction forces all wore similar uniforms and were difficult to tell apart.

¶ 15. (SBU) COL Kong Lum openly discussed the incident with Poloff and acknowledged the injuries to the villagers. He said that during the eviction the villagers were armed with axes, knives and other weapons, and that the villagers were threatening some of the soldiers. He showed photographs of villagers gathered in groups and armed with axes, knives and machetes, as well as photos of similarly armed villagers surrounding a single soldier standing in one of the houses, which he said were taken during the eviction attempt. He produced two machetes and a pellet gun that he said his soldiers confiscated from evictees during the incident. The colonel said that his unit eventually backed down during the eviction attempt to prevent further escalation of violence. The villagers, who made no mention of being armed, maintain that the soldiers attacked without provocation.

EVENTS LEADING TO THE EVICTION

¶ 16. (SBU) Anlong Khmeng Leng has grown significantly over the past five years according to villagers and local NGOs. A community representative said that about 50 families occupied land in the area in the late 1990's, but that the village numbered about 300 families at the time of the eviction attempt. Kampot Governor Khoy Khunhour accused "masterminds" of luring settlers to the area with the

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promise of free land that could be occupied and then sold for a profit.

¶ 17. (SBU) A Kampot government official told Poloff that forestry officials had informed the villagers on three or four occasions that they were illegally occupying state land and would have to leave. The villagers reported receiving two verbal eviction warnings from the military and maintained that they did not receive a written eviction notice at all. They said that they did not receive notice of an eviction date and were taken by surprise when armed forces came to remove them on November 17.

¶ 18. (SBU) Accusations of illegal logging have also contributed to the tension in the area. The forestry office posted signs around the area informing villagers that they were within the boundaries of Bokor National Forest and could not log trees in the area. The villagers maintain that they had only cleared trees on the land they occupied [NOTE: within Bokor National Park boundaries. END NOTE.] Poloff observed a truck loaded with timber that villagers said was for a wedding ceremony.

CURRENT STATUS

¶ 19. (SBU) Because the eviction operation ended before it was completed, about 200 families remain on the disputed land. Poloff visited the scene and confirmed that most of the houses in the village had been burned down, although some villagers had already begun rebuilding. Community representatives told Poloff that although there are checkpoints at both ends of the major access road to the area, soldiers were allowing villagers to come and go freely.

¶ 10. (SBU) Although they have no legal claim to the land under the 2001 Cambodian Land Law, the villagers maintain that because they are poor and without land, the provincial government should grant them a social concession to stay in Anlong Khmeng Leng. Governor Khoy Khunhour told Poloff that he is working with local NGOs to determine which of the villagers are genuinely landless so that he can develop a resettlement plan. He alleged, however, that over half of the Anlong Khmeng Leng villagers are transplants from other provinces that already own land elsewhere. They should look to

their own governors for assistance, he argued, rather than coming to Kampot and demanding land from him.

¶11. (SBU) COL Kong Lum said that his unit is standing down for now (except for the road checkpoints), unless he receives further orders from his commander, which would presumably follow the governor's resettlement plan for the villagers. He said that he has ordered his soldiers to stay away from the Anlong Khmeng Leng, as the villagers remain hostile to them when approached. He also said that B31 plans to conduct a review of the incident to identify what happened and lessons learned. DATT plans to follow-up on the review with B31's Commander, RADM Sun Saroeun.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) The exact details of the November 17 incident may never be completely clear, but the Anlong Khmeng Leng case is indicative of a larger set of common land issues in Cambodia. Post is developing a cable to highlight these larger issues surrounding land ownership, land policy, and the use of the military (versus relying on the police) that complicate this case. We will also develop a strategy for further engagement with the Cambodian government on land issues in general.

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